

Ending parole board won't help prisons

THE ISSUE *As the past year proved, ending state prison overcrowding requires more than speedy paroles.*

Alabama has a big prison problem. The state has too many prisoners, too little space for them and too few guards to watch over them. It also has too little money to fix any of those problems.

Abolishing a second parole board created to speed up the parole of nonviolent criminals won't change any of these facts for the better. That doesn't mean the state shouldn't disband the special board if there isn't work for it to do. Alabama Attorney General Troy King says the special board has done its job of clearing up a backlog of parole requests and is no longer needed.

But the fact the state is looking to eliminate the board when prisons are still housing twice as many inmates as they were built to hold shows the state still has much work to do.

The second parole board did its job. Over about a year's period, it paroled more than 2,200 nonviolent offenders. With the stepped-up efforts of the regular parole board, the two boards released almost 4,200 inmates, and nearly 90 percent of them have managed to stay out of trouble.

But the prison population has dropped only about 350. Prisons still have more than 27,000 inmates. So, even with the additional paroles, prisons managed only to tread water because new inmates continue to flood

the system.

If the extra parole board is eliminated and nothing is done on the front end to slow the flow of new prisoners, the number of inmates will again swell.

To make real headway against prison overcrowding, the state must reform its sentencing laws and practices. Alabama simply sends too many people to prison for sentences that are too long, especially for non-violent offenses.

The state needs to make better use of alternatives to prison, such as drug and mental health counseling and community corrections programs. And, finally, the state must enable more inmates to qualify for parole by ensuring that drug and alcohol counseling is readily available for those who must complete counseling before they can be released, and by increasing the number of transition centers or halfway houses for those leaving prison.

These things will work not only in the short term, but in the long run as well.

Of course, the state has another option. It can do nothing and wait until federal or state courts come in, rule prisons unconstitutional again and order the state to fix them or release prisoners.

That option could prove the most costly.

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